

Applied Behavior Analysis: A Focus on Outcomes

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For decades, applied behavior analysis (ABA) has been widely touted as an approach that leads to best outcomes for individuals on the autism spectrum. Businesses and treatments have been built upon the strategies associated with applied behavior analysis. Looking at these various business and treatments, it is clear that there are many and diverse interpretations of what ABA is or is not. In some circles, ABA is used to refer to the use of discrete trial teaching only. Others use the term to refer to a very specific curriculum and procedure. Through studying ABA, what seems obvious is that it is a collection of tools that can be widely used and should be infused into any setting. Applied behavior analysis (ABA) involves various strategies and techniques which are evidence-based and utilized in working with individuals across the autism spectrum, and those with and without disabilities. In truth, these are strategies we use with each other daily. During the next several months, IRCA will disseminate articles with the goal of providing practical suggestions for infusing ABA practices across a variety of settings, including the home. It is a wonderful technology and should be broadly used.

To begin this series, let's first talk about what each word in Applied Behavior Analysis means. The use of the word "applied" reflects the goal that strategies should lead to individuals learning socially significant behaviors or outcomes. This is a particularly important concept. ABA is not the outcome. We have not achieved our goal if the only outcome is that we have implemented an ABA program. Rather, we must be sure that the ABA strategies we use result in behavior change that impacts a person's life in the areas of social, communication, vocational, academic and so on. Some ABA programs come with very prescriptive curriculum that may follow a developmental model. This can be helpful. However, we still should question whether the skills we are teaching these children will enhance their quality of life and lead to meaningful life and adult outcomes. Our definition of a meaningful skill to learn should shift as a person ages. For example, teaching primary colors of red, blue, and yellow are important when a child is 5. If we are still working on that skill when the child is 15, we need to refocus our efforts. At 15, there are many important skills students will need to learn to prepare for transition to adulthood. Helpful questions to ask include "If my son or daughter cannot do this skill, will someone else have to do it for them?" So, before you choose the strategies to use, identify the outcomes you hope to achieve. Carefully think about specific skills you want your son/daughter to learn. Remember that ABA is the process and not the outcome.

The word "behavior" is used to highlight that we are focused on objective measures of behavioral change. The behavior must be measurable and observable. Goal statements such as the student will comprehend a story are not measurable or observable. We cannot see comprehension. There is not a look that students get in their eyes when they truly comprehend. However, stating that a student will answer four questions about a story is measurable and observable. Generic statements such as "the student will improve social skills" are too subjective. In other words, one person's standard for improved social skills, may be very different than another person's standard. Be specific and clear about desired outcomes. For example, the goal for one student may be that they "will stand at least three feet from another person when engaging in conversation." By using objective, observable, and measurable goal statements, we can truly identify and document behavior change. It is not left to our opinion or judgment whether change has happened.

The word “analysis” is used to highlight the fact that data is used to measure behavior change in an objective fashion. The goal is to be able to document the relationship between our interventions and the occurrence or non-occurrence of the targeted behavior. This decision is not based on professional judgment, but must be based on data.

So in summary, ABA is a systematic and data-driven approach that results in changing socially significant behaviors. Ultimately, the focus is on measured outcomes achieved. Our job is to make sure these outcomes are meaningful and add to an individual’s quality of life.